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Washington's Offender Accountability Act:
An Evaluation of the Department of Corrections' Risk Management Identification System

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 1999, the Legislature passed the Offender Accountability Act (OAA). The Act amended state law to establish that reducing the "risk of reoffending by offenders in the community" is a goal of Washington's sentencing policy. To implement this policy, the OAA directs the Department of Corrections (DOC) to classify felony offenders according to two factors: the risk they pose to re-offending in the future, and the amount of harm they have caused society in the past.

After offenders are classified, the OAA then directs DOC to deploy more resources to higher-risk offenders and—because state agency budgets must balance—to spend fewer dollars and less effort on lower-risk offenders. The Legislature intended that these and other OAA changes would reduce re-offense rates, and it directed the Washington State Institute for Public Policy to evaluate the results.

It is too early in the implementation of the OAA to measure whether the Act reduces re-offense rates. In subsequent reports to the legislature, the Institute will evaluate this "bottom line" outcome. In this report, we analyze one cornerstone of the OAA: DOC's Risk Management Identification (RMI) system. We test to see if it measures what the Legislature intended.

We analyzed the first substantial group of offenders classified by DOC. We found that DOC's RMI system does a reasonable job of classifying offenders pursuant to the policy directives of the OAA. We also found, however, that under DOC's current RMI criteria, it is possible, although rare, for an offender with a serious violent offense (e.g., murder) to be classified in the groups that will receive the lowest levels of supervision in the community.